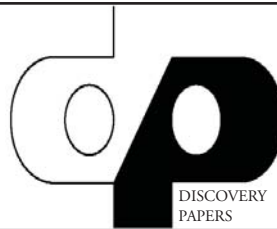


BUILDING A NEW WORLD

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK



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I was delighted to see Mark Spoelstra, a former intern at Peninsula Bible Church, featured in Martin Scorsese's 2005 documentary *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan*. Mark, a singer and songwriter, played with Dylan in the coffee houses of New York in the early 1960s. He interned at PBC in the mid-1970s and remained a follower of Jesus until his death from cancer in 2007. Reflecting on his younger years, when he and Dylan were both in their early twenties, Spoelstra said, "We really believed we were going to have a part, as songwriters, in changing the world."¹

It is the prerogative of the young—and dreamers of every age—to want to change the world. Jesus of Nazareth aspired to change the world. More than that, he aspired to build a new world. Although he defeated evil in his death and resurrection, his aspirations have yet to be fully realized. So, as the resurrected Lord of the world, how is he hoping to complete his mission? He's hoping to do so through us, his followers. He hands us a trowel and says, "Get to work." Uh, what do we do now? We might begin by meeting Jesus again in the gospels—say, in Mark 6:1-13.

After healing the unclean woman and raising the synagogue ruler's daughter from the dead by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus travels to his hometown, Nazareth, about twenty-two miles away as the crow flies.²

Mark 6:1-13

Jesus went out from there and came into His hometown; and His disciples followed Him. When the Sabbath came, He began to teach in the synagogue; and the many listeners were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things, and what is this wisdom given to Him, and such miracles as these performed by His hands? "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?" And they took offense at Him. Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and among his own relatives and in his own household." And He could do no miracle there except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them. And He wondered at their unbelief. And He was going around the villages teaching.

And He summoned the twelve and began to send them out in pairs, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits; and He instructed them that they should take nothing for their journey, except a mere staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belt—but to wear sandals; and He added, "Do not put on two tunics." And He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house,

stay there until you leave town. Any place that does not receive you or listen to you, as you go out from there, shake the dust off the soles of your feet for a testimony against them." They went out and preached that men should repent. And they were casting out many demons and were anointing with oil many sick people and healing them.³

Cold shoulder for a native son

Earlier, when Jesus' family members journeyed from Nazareth to Capernaum, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, they tried to rescue him because he was articulating a controversial version of the kingdom of God that upstaged sacred symbols such as the temple and the Sabbath. Jesus, however, identified those who were listening to him as family members, even though they were unrelated to him (Mark 3:13-35). Now, as Jesus makes the journey from the sea to his hometown, we wonder what kind of reception he will receive. Mark mentions that Jesus' disciples are following him, an important detail as the narrative unfolds. The disciples up to this point have been mostly spectators, not participants. That's about to change.⁴

The residents take note of his wisdom and miracles and wonder about him but in an impersonal and close-minded way. They also take note of his vocation, that of a carpenter, and his family, neither of which seems compatible with the wisdom of his words and the power of his hands. Nothing in Jesus' background suggested to his hometown that he was destined for this kind of greatness. They question the source of his wisdom and power, knowing, perhaps with more than a tinge of jealousy, that he didn't get it from them. In their presence, he used his hands to build things, not heal people and cast out demons. At the outset of his gospel, Mark revealed to us the source of Jesus' wisdom and power: the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:9-10). Scribes from Jerusalem, however, attributed Jesus' power to Satan (Mark 3:22). The residents of his hometown fall short of accusing Jesus of being in league with the devil, but they come very near to doing so.

The townspeople name Jesus' mother and his brothers. Mark, in reporting the words of the townspeople, would have us remember that the names of Jesus' brothers are also shared by some Jesus' disciples (Mark 3:16-19). From Mark's perspective, the brothers, like the disciples, ought to be following Jesus. The townspeople also note that Jesus' sisters are "here with us," not with Jesus. Mark later reports that women from Galilee—and even a mother named Mary—followed Jesus and ministered to him, but neither his mother nor his sisters are among them at this point (Mark 15:40-41). If God were the source of Jesus' wisdom

and power, the townspeople conclude, then surely his own family members, who know him best, would be following him. From the perspective of Jesus' hometown, his family's resistance to him serves as evidence against him.

The men and women of Jesus' hometown can't get past the way they used to see him. Who he appears to be—not to mention his controversial message—challenges their view of the world. They want him to keep his place so that they can feel safe. The collective defense mechanisms—so common to families, towns, and institutions—kick in to confine Jesus to their conception of him. The townspeople let Jesus know what they think and, in so doing, attempt to push his emotional buttons. Many of us know what this is like: we know how to push such buttons, and we know what it feels like to have such buttons pushed. Literally, the townspeople are “stumbled” by him. Yes, Jesus is a carpenter, but he is also the Son of God. He is building more than houses. He is the stone over which many people, including the people of his hometown, stumble but which turns out to be the cornerstone of a new temple, made without hands, comprising the people of God (Psalm 118:23; Mark 12:10-11; Romans 9:32-33, 10:11). The townspeople fail to embrace the fuller picture of Jesus that is emerging. Jesus refuses to submit to his hometown's flawed conception of him. Instead, he submits to his heavenly Father.⁵

Jesus, in explaining the effect of his parables, said some would hear but not understand (Mark 4:10-12). Jesus is like a parable to the residents of his hometown. Many were “listeners,” but no one understood. They hear, but they don't really hear. They neither “hear the word” nor “accept it” (Mark 4:20).

On the one hand, Jesus understands the response of his hometown to be axiomatic. Prophets, he says, are honored elsewhere but not in their hometowns and not among their families. Moses, Jeremiah, and David would be cases in point. For them, and for Jesus, familiarity breeds contempt. On the other hand, in speaking to his townspeople in this way, Jesus wants to help them understand that he, like the men of old who were rejected by their people, is a prophet. A prophet he is—and more than a prophet. Mark, in the previous passage, reported that Jesus entered “the house of the synagogue ruler” and raised his daughter from the dead. In his hometown, however, Jesus is not honored, not even in (literally) “the house of him.”

When God called Abraham to be the father of a new nation that would save the world, he told him:

Go forth from your country,
And from your relatives
And from your father's house
To the land which I will show you;
And I will make you a great nation
And I will bless you,
And make your name great;
And so you shall be a blessing;

And I will bless those who bless you

And the one who curses you I will curse.

And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed. (Genesis 12:1-3)

In order to fulfill God's promise to Abraham, Jesus, like the patriarch, must go forth from his country, from his relatives, and from his house. When he's finished, he will have blessed all the families of the earth, created from them a new people, and brought them into a new land: the new heavens and the new earth.

Mark, in his previous passage, emphasized faith, which means, at the broadest level, the belief that God is working through Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus told the unclean woman, “Daughter, your faith has made you well” (Mark 5:34). He told the synagogue ruler, “Do not be afraid any longer; only believe” (Mark 5:36). The people of Jesus' hometown, however, question the source of his power. Mark depicts Jesus as having the capacity for miracles—literally, “works of power”—but not the ability in this case because of unbelief. In his hometown, Jesus only healed a few sick people, whereas by the sea, he raised a girl from the dead.

Whereas the townspeople were astonished by Jesus, Jesus wonders at their unbelief—their failure to believe in the work of God. Yes, a prophet is not without honor except in his hometown, but Jesus expected more from his people.

Meeting Jesus again

We often form opinions of people based on early impressions in order to determine what we can expect from them. We want to know their strengths, weaknesses, and tendencies in order to effectively and safely make our way in the world. We do this quickly and easily, almost as a matter of second nature. Such is the nature of self-protective and self-advancing psychological strategies. We do the same thing with Jesus. All of us, to varying degrees, are familiar with Jesus. We are in that sense like the people of his hometown. We are also like them in another sense: because we're familiar with Jesus, we have an opinion of him.

Many confine Jesus to the pages of history and allow him no influence over their lives. Some, in support of unbelief, point to all those who were reared in the church but walked away from faith. If those who should know Jesus best, like his own family members (in the first century) and people reared in the church (today), shun him, then many conclude that he's not worth their time. Others, while believing him to be dead and buried, acknowledge his wisdom, like the people of his hometown, and may even embrace parts of his teaching. Still others believe that God raised Jesus from the dead and submit their lives to his leadership.

Those of us who believe that Jesus is the risen Lord of the world are especially familiar with him. We've formed an opinion of him based on what we've been taught, what we've learned, and what we've experienced. Because of our familiarity with him, we may be inclined, like the people of his hometown, to think we have him pegged. We do with Jesus what we do with others in our world: we form an opinion of him so that we can effectively and safely make our way in the world, getting his help when we want it and keeping him at arm's length when we don't.

For all of us who want to follow Jesus, we have to admit that our knowledge of him is incomplete, no matter how familiar we are with him. Sometimes, our familiarity with him keeps us from embracing more of who he really is and what he really is doing in our lives and in the world. We may even, like the people of his hometown, take offense at him—or at least at the fuller picture of him that is emerging—and do all we can, when our defense mechanisms kick in, to hold onto our old version of who he is and what he's doing. Jesus, however, doesn't seem inclined to conform himself to our flawed vision of him. On the contrary, he wants to help us, as he wanted to help the people of his hometown, grow in our understanding of him. Also, consider this: the old version of Jesus may not be worth holding onto, anyway.

Many who grow up with Jesus cease following him once they realize they don't like what they've been taught about him. They never ask themselves, however, which Jesus they're rejecting: the Jesus they've learned about or the Jesus of the gospels. Sooner or later, all of us run into the biggest stumbling block: Jesus doesn't do what we want him to do for us and for the world. For this reason, many question his effectiveness, not to mention his existence. Why doesn't Jesus do what we want him to do? Short answer: because he's building a new world. We can't begin to grasp the vastness of God's vision or the intricacy of his design. We can't see with our eyes that what appears to be a roadblock in the way of our hopes is in reality a building block for a new world. Such roadblocks, which often provoke crises in faith, confront us with a choice: do we abandon Jesus or seek a fuller understanding of him? When you follow Jesus and come to a roadblock on your way to earthly bliss, know that you're not seeing all there is to see and that you have the opportunity to meet Jesus again.

While training for ministry, Todd Cleek, now a pastor at a church in Auburn, was taking a course at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. The professor, Rikk Watts, asked the class a question concerning the details of Jesus' life. Cleek remembers:

I have no recollection of what he asked specifically, but his response to the silence that followed shocked and changed me. He rebuked us all, saying, "How can you call Jesus Lord and not know about him and his life?" I am sure the reason I remember Rikk's comment so clearly is that it rang true. There we sat, thirty men and women, many training for ministry as a vocation and we were unsure exactly who Jesus was.⁶

Perhaps some of those students needed to meet Jesus again.

To guard against settling for a non-biblical version of Jesus, renew your mind in the gospels and in the Hebrew Scriptures, which inform the gospels. Let the Jesus of the gospels cleanse your mind and form your understanding of him.

Although many people shun Jesus because he doesn't conform to their expectations, many others emerge from crises of faith with a renewed appreciation for Jesus and a stronger relationship with him. Thus, writers such as Philip Yancey and Tim Stafford, after renewing their minds with the gospels in their middle years, write books with titles such as *The Jesus I Never Knew* and *Surprised by Jesus*.

The Jesus of the gospels turns out to be not so tame as many of us thought—concerned for each of us, yes, but also concerned to enlist us in his mission to build a new world. On the one hand, letting go of an old understanding of Jesus and reaching out to embrace a new understanding may feel like a risky undertaking, like letting go of one trapeze bar and reaching out for another that may or may not be there. On the other hand, those who reach out for a new understanding are rewarded with the thrilling prospect of following Jesus into the world in new ways.

Jesus sends out his disciples

Jesus goes forth from his hometown, from his relatives, and from his house to teach in nearby villages. In the process, he summons his disciples, whom Mark calls "the twelve," representatives of Jesus' new family and the new Israel. The family of Abraham, through Isaac and Jacob, comprised twelve sons, the patriarchs of the twelve tribes. Jesus first gathered his disciples in order that he might send them out to preach and cast out demons (Mark 3:14-15).

The disciples have seen people both accept and reject Jesus and his message. They've seen him draw the ire of powerful enemies, both human and demonic. They know, based on what Jesus has told them, that Satan "takes away the word" from some (Mark 4:15). However, they've also heard Jesus say that he has bound the "strong man," Satan himself (Mark 3:27). They've watched Jesus preach, cast out demons, heal the sick, and even raise the dead. By schooling them in his parables, Jesus has taught them to expect rejection but to believe that the kingdom of God is breaking into this world regardless of appearances. He now shares his dangerous mission with his disciples, sending them out with his authority to announce and enact the in-breaking of God's kingdom. Jesus orchestrates the disciples' transition from spectators to participants.

The conquest of the Promised Land began when Joshua sent two spies to view the land (Joshua 2:1). The new conquest, which will create a new people and enlarge the Promised Land so that it includes all creation, begins when Jesus sends out his disciples in pairs.

Jesus' instructions to his disciples echo the danger

and urgency of both the Exodus and the conquest. The Lord instructed the Israelites in Egypt, on the verge of the Exodus, to eat the Passover “with your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand” (Exodus 12:11). They ate unleavened bread because they had no time to let bread rise when the time came to leave Egypt (Deuteronomy 16:3). Similarly, Jesus instructs his disciples to take nothing for their journey except a mere “staff” and to wear (literally) “tied sandals.” If the Israelites of old ate unleavened bread, the disciples are to take no bread whatsoever. The disciples can’t be weighed down by bag or money (literally, “copper” coins). They can’t even take an extra shirt for protection against the cold. Like the Israelites of old and like Jesus himself, who kept on the move to avoid arrest, the disciples must be ready to move at a moment’s notice.

Without provisions, the disciples will be dependent on the hospitality of the villages they visit. Jesus’ instructions force them to believe in his authority to open doors—literally—just as the Israelites of old had to depend on the hospitality of God in the wilderness after they left Egypt. The disciples must seek out houses that honor them, unlike Jesus’ house. Like the two spies who came to Jericho and remained in the house of Rahab until they left, each pair of disciples must remain in a house that receives them (Joshua 2:1-7). In this way, the disciples will build relationships and leave behind witnesses, just as the two spies left behind Rahab.

Based on the parables and on the cool reception Jesus received in some places, the disciples have been prepared to expect rejection. Some would “hear the word and accept it,” but others would “not receive” or “listen” to the disciples (Mark 4:15-19, 4:20, 6:11). They are to leave behind witnesses in the houses that receive them, but they themselves are to serve as witnesses as they leave villages that reject their message. Some Jews, to avoid being contaminated, would shake the dust off their feet when leaving Gentile lands. Now Jesus tells his disciples to do the same, in a public way, when leaving Jewish villages that reject them. The disciples would be symbolically communicating that Jews who reject the message of the kingdom are outside the people of God.⁷

The disciples follow orders. Jesus originally appointed them to preach and cast out demons, and, in their first outing, they prove faithful to their commission. Like John the Baptist and Jesus himself, they preach repentance: the abandonment of conventional notions of the kingdom of God (Mark 1:4, 15). Whereas Jesus was only able to heal “a few sick people” in his hometown because of unbelief, the disciples cast out “many demons” and heal “many sick people.”⁸ Jesus’ ineffectiveness in his hometown is overshadowed by his disciples’ effectiveness in the surrounding villages.

Embracing Jesus’ mission to the world

Sometimes, embracing more of who Jesus is involves facing the rejection of family and friends. If we follow Jesus, however, he’ll turn rejection into a doorway. If our

family and friends reject us, the Lord will take us up and give us a new and larger family, comprising fellow followers of Jesus, with a new and larger purpose. Some of us, therefore, must go forth from others’ understanding of us, like Jesus went forth from his hometown. Always watch for how God transforms rejection into a doorway for what he really wants to do in your life.

Embracing more of who Jesus is also involves embracing his mission to the world. He orchestrates our transition from spectators to participants, sharing his mission of mercy with us, sending us into a resistant but needy world with his authority. Jesus gifts us with the opportunity to participate in his mission—and we must see the opportunity to participate as a gift, not as a burden, if we are to truly embrace it. He enlists us in the new conquest, the creation of a new people, and the expansion of the Promised Land. In short, he commissions us to build a new world with him.

How do we do it? Like the first disciples, we announce the presence of God’s healing, loving rule in the person of Jesus Christ and apply his rule in practical ways to the pain of the world. Sure, if you meet a demon, cast it out in Jesus’ name. More often, bring the love of God to bear on places in our world where evil holds sway. Sure, heal the sick if you can. More often, pray for the sick and care for them. If we confront evil and care for the sick in courageous but loving ways, our message becomes self-authenticating. When we announce the presence of God’s rule and apply the balm of his love to the pain of the world, we give our world a compelling vision for the new world that Jesus is building. In fact, we lay a few bricks in the new world, for those who take up a trowel in Jesus’ name never toil in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Team up, like the disciples, in small groups or in pairs—in your neighborhoods, in your workplaces, and in your schools—to bring God’s healing, loving rule to those places. Like the disciples, build relationships in those places.

Some aspects of the disciples’ short-term mission to the villages of Galilee are not for all times and places. But when and where swift and dangerous missions are called for, yes, be careful, travel light, and keep on the move, lest enemies of the gospel get a fix on you. Last year, when I participated in a short-term mission to a country less favorably disposed to the gospel, our hosts took measures to guard against terrorist attacks. They whisked us in and out of our meetings. They never let us stay out in the open for very long. Halfway through our stay, they moved us from a hotel to a private residence. Also, while the symbol of shaking the dust off one’s feet doesn’t translate well in our culture, we may have occasion to tell people that their rejection of Jesus Christ places them in peril, outside the reach of God’s healing, loving rule.

As we bring God’s healing, loving rule to the world, Jesus, having schooled us in his parables, teaches us to expect rejection—so that we’re not discouraged by it—but to believe in God’s power. Jesus has bound the strong man, Satan himself, and sends us out with his authority to raid

enemy territory with the love of God. Jesus gives us every reason to be bold and courageous, not to mention cheerful and winsome.

Don't let others have all the fun. Discover the power and beauty of the kingdom. Incorporate the mission of Jesus into your thinking, prayers, and vocation. Be a healing teacher, a healing engineer, a healing bricklayer, a healing student, a healing job-seeker; be a healing mother or father, a healing son or daughter, a healing brother or sister. Don't be paralyzed by everything you could do or everything you think you should do to the extent that you do nothing. Also, refuse to be motivated by guilt over inactivity. Instead, let Jesus speak to your heart. Don't turn yourself into a fisher of people. Follow Jesus, and he will make you a fisher of people (Mark 1:17). Don't try to create something; watch for what Jesus is creating. Be sensitive to stirrings in your heart that resonate with unexpected opportunities. What, specifically, should you do? That's Jesus' business. Cultivate a relationship with him. He'll shape you and get you to where he wants you.

I think of Jennifer Swanson, a member of our body, as a healing teacher who brings God's rule to her public elementary school. When I asked her recently about her job, she answered by speaking about her concern for one of her pupils whose father, his sole caregiver, was seriously injured in an automobile accident:

My immediate response was to pray. So, I prayed a lot. I paid close attention to the boy that week—speaking quietly and gently to him, checking in with him throughout the day to see how he was doing, letting him rest when he needed to, work when he was able, and talk or not talk depending upon what he wanted to do. His dad spent many weeks in the hospital as he healed. It's made me realize how important my role is in his life now. I'm not just his teacher—I'm a mentor, a counselor, a prayer warrior. I helped give him some sense of normalcy at school. God has given me compassion for people. I know that comes from God.

Jennifer, it seems to me, has incorporated Jesus' mission to the world into her vocation as a teacher.

Take up a trowel

Meeting Jesus again involves embracing his mission, which is to build a new world by announcing the presence of God's healing, loving rule in the person of Jesus Christ and applying his rule in practical ways to the pain of the world.

A few days ago, I took a trip north of the bay. I stopped at a favorite spot overlooking the Pacific. I was struck by the contrast between the creative beauty of God's power and the brokenness of the world—and the brokenness in my own heart. God's power is so beautiful, yet the world

is so broken. So beautiful, so broken. Deep in my heart, for fifteen minutes or so, I ached—in a pleasing sort of way—for the day when God's beauty finally mends his broken world.

Until then, I've got work to do. And so do you. So, mix up some mortar and take up a trowel. We're building a new world.

NOTES

¹ *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan* (Spitfire Pictures, 2005).

² Mark has already identified Jesus' hometown as Nazareth (Mark 1:9). He doesn't name the town in this passage, perhaps because its treatment of Jesus disqualifies it and because the identity of its native son supersedes the name of the town.

³ Literary structure:

A Jesus came into hometown (1)

B Rejection by those who should be disciples (2-4)

C Jesus healed only a few sick people (5-6a)

A' Jesus began to send out the twelve (6b-7)

B' Jesus instructed those who were disciples (8-11)

C' Disciples preached, cast out many demons, healed many sick people (12-13)

⁴ When Jesus first came to Capernaum, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, he entered the synagogue there and began to teach. Those in attendance were amazed because Jesus taught with authority (Mark 1:21-28). The residents of Jesus' hometown are likewise amazed when he teaches in their synagogue. The amazement in Capernaum was open-ended, prompting people to ask, "What is this?" The amazement in his hometown, however, turns against him.

⁵ Jesus' reception in his hometown foreshadows his reception in Jerusalem. If his hometown ought to have welcomed its native son, Jerusalem, presumably the home of the Messiah, ought to welcome the Son of God. When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, however, Jerusalem handed him over to the Romans for crucifixion.

⁶ Todd Cleek, *Perspectives* (Cupertino: Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino, October-November 2000).

⁷ When Jesus instructs his disciples to literally shake off the "soil" of villages that don't receive them, they would be reminded of the three seed parables, which compared people to soil (Mark 4:1-20, 26-32). Those who reject the disciples will have proved themselves to be poor soil, unreceptive to the message of the kingdom. As poor soil, those who reject the disciples are standing on dangerous ground.

⁸ Mark has not specifically reported that Jesus commissioned the disciples to heal people, but inasmuch as he healed people and he sends them out with his authority, the commission to heal is implicit in Mark's reportage. The use of oil, which was sometimes used medicinally, symbolizes God's care (Luke 10:35, Psalm 45:7, Isaiah 61:3).